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ABSTRACT

The educational history and practices of the Republic of Singapore, prefaced by a description of the inception of the republic, are described in this paper. The uniqueness of that history stems from the republic's multiracial society which requires equal education opportunities for all four official language groups--Malay, Chinese, Tamil (Indian), and English. The information presented in this paper provides material for a case study approach to education in a multiracial society. (JH)

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EDUCATION IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SOCIETY: THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

by

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PREFACE

While on Sabbatical leave from the State University of New York at Stony Brook during the 1973-1974 academic year, Professor Shi Ming Hu studied social, cultural and educational developments in Southeast Asia. This field-based research included the analysis of primary source documents, interviews with Asian educators, and an extensive series of school visitations. Dr. Hu is currently preparing a number of manuscripts describing and analyzing contemporary educational developments in Southeast Asia. This particular manuscript focuses on Singapore.

From a small island fishing village which Sir Thomas Stanford Raffles made a possession of the British East India Company in 1819, to a self-governing independent republic (1965), Singapore has developed a multi-racial society which reflects its historical evolution.

The Republic of Singapore, as a matter of government policy provides equal educational opportunities in the nation's four official languages--Malay, Chinese, Tamil (Indian), and English--with parents free to choose the particular language used as the medium of instruction.

The editor believes that this manuscript will provide social studies educators with material for a unique case study of one nation's approach to education in a multi-racial society.

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E. Seifman (General Editor)

Singapore is one of the smallest island states in the world, located at the tip of Malay pennisula. The shell-like island is only 225 sq. miles, surrounded by many smaller islands, and linked by a Causeway over Johore Strait to the pennisula. Because of the recent political development and the increase of international sea and air traffic, Singapore has become a more familiar and interesting spot in Southeast Asia.

Many sources indicate that the present-day history of Singapore began with Sir Thomas Stanford Raffles, a talented English man, who made an island fishing village of about 500 inhabitants as a possession of the British East India Company in 1819.[1] The new settlement grew steadily but rapidly; in 1826, Singapore joined Penang and Malaca (both are now cities on Malay pennisula) to form the Straits Settlements; it became a Crown Colony in 1867 and gradually came under British protection. The colonial status of Singapore continued until the Japanese occupation during the second world war in 1942.

As soon as the war was over in 1945, Singapore returned as one of the British colonies with a civil government restored in 1946. Nine years later (1955), Singapore was able to achieve a limited self-government, and obtained a complete internal self-government with the People's Action Party, of which Lee Kuen-Yew was (and is) the leader; Lee met with Tunku Abdul Rahman (the

Prime Minister of Malay) in 1961 to discuss a proposal of creating a federation of Malaysia. The proposal was realized in 1963 and the Federation of Malaysia consisting of Malay, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah was formally proclaimed in Sept. 1963.

Theoretically and geographically, the Federation of Ma-Laysia to include Singapore was justified; but in practice, because of the complexity of human relationship, the plan could not be carried out satisfactorily. After a short period of two years, Singapore was seperated from the Federation of Malaysia headed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, who "was afraid of Lee's ambitions and he chose to face a future without Singapore rather than risk political eclipse in Singapore's shadow."[2] Singapore has thus, become a self-governing independent republic, the twenty-second member of the Commonwealth, since August, 1965.

The complexity of human relationship not only led to the seperation of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia, but to create quitea string of social difficulties for its leader, Lee Kuen-Yew to surmount during the first few years of his power because of the multi-racial mixture on the island.

The early population in Singapore included mainly Malay and Chinese (the origin of these peoples will not be elaborated here because of the nature of this paper), plus a few European

explorers. Over one and a half century, the population has encompassed approximately 2.15 million people made up of Chinese (about 1,512,000), Malay and Indonesians (nearly 300,000), Indians and Pakistanis (about 160,000), Ceylonese, Napalese, Thai, Japanese, Fillipinos, Arabs, Jews, Eurasians, and Europeans (all these totaled up to about 65,000).[3] As a result of the increasing trades, immigrants have been continuously brought to Singapore to the present time. Naturally each group brings along its own traditions and culture, that in turn form a rather unique immigrant culture of multi-races in Singapore. However, the statistics alone seem to offer a logical base for many policies and practices in Singapore to achieve racial harmony. In other words, most of the decisions are based upon three major ethnic groups--Chinese, Malay, and Indian.

In addition, one other element which has always played a decisive role in Singapore is "English background" derived from the long-term British colonization rather than the number of English people. People in Singapore still feel more comfortable with English education, certificate and examinations, sports and games, and English with "British accent," which seems to carry certain unwritten prestige passed down from previous colonial officials.

In education, the trend of toward quarternity is fairly

evident, as it is clearly stated that "The government provides education in the four official languages of Malay, Chinese, Tamil (Indian), and English to all regardless of race, language, religion, sex, and socio-economic background. Parents are free to choose the language to be used as the medium of instruction for their children's education. Whatever the language chosen, the government's policy of parity of treatment for the four language streams ensures that the standards concerning curricula and staff are comparable, that physical facilities and financial provisions are identical, and that academic and professional qualifications obtained on completion of courses in the various language streams are equally acceptable for higher education and for employment."[4]

In order to implement this policy, the government makes provisions for schools in four official languages--Malay, Tamil, Chinese, and English, operated as either government schools or government-aided schools.* (There are also a very small number of private primary and secondary schools existing in Singapore; they too, have to comply with professional and administrative requirements prescribed by the Ministry of Education.)

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*The government schools are completely financed by the government while the government-aided schools are supported by the government only in staff salaries and allowances, and 50% for their development as well as per capita grant for recurrent costs based upon student enrollment.

According to the government sources, the educational system now in operation can be illustrated by the following chart: [5]

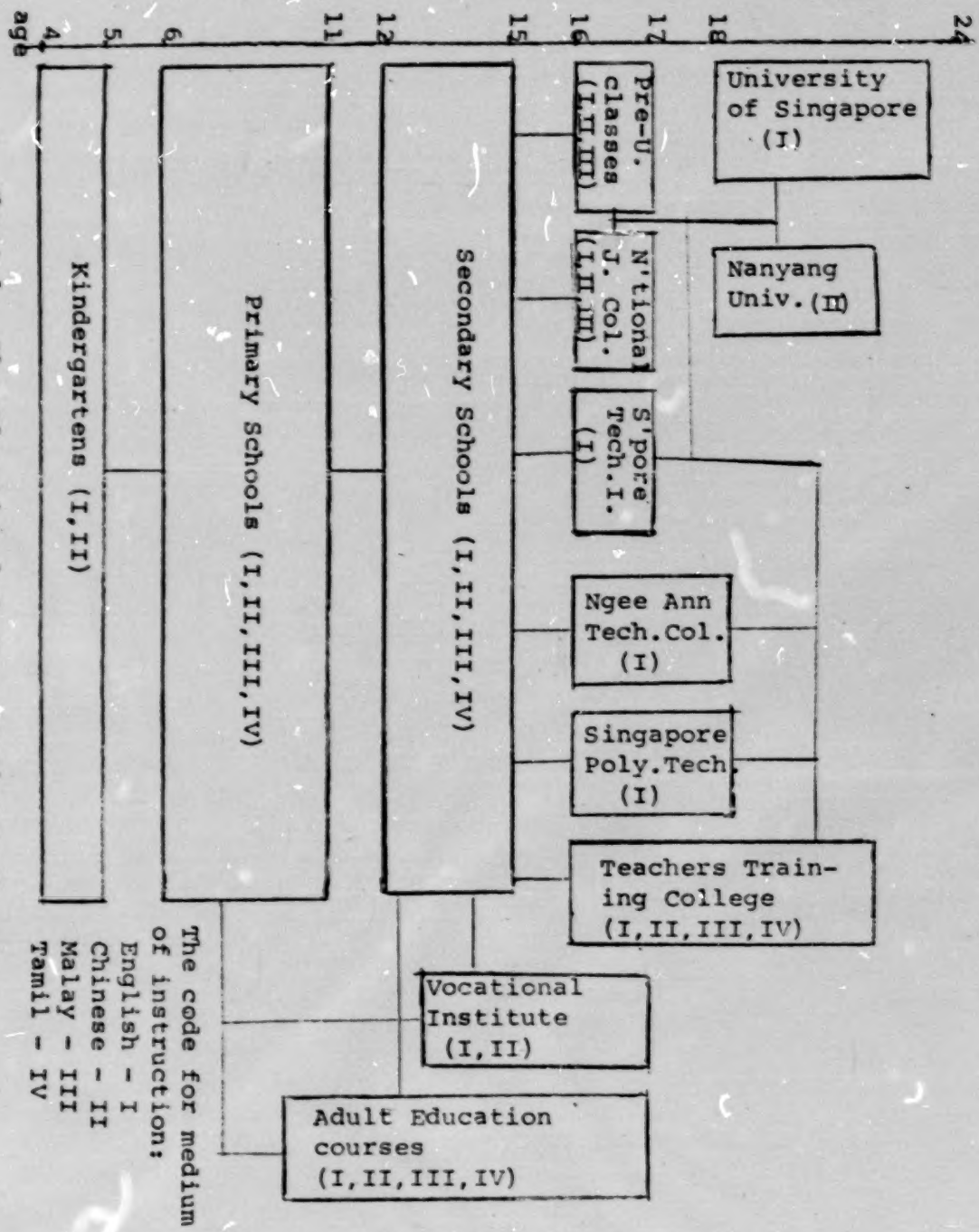

Chart 1. The Educational System in Singapore

The entire educational system includes pre-school, primary education, secondary education, post-secondary education, adult education, and special education for handicapped children. The government intends to have all children get at least ten years of education, but right now free education is limited to the primary level and offers to Singapore citizens only.

Upon completion of six years of primary education, the students take Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which is the first "cut-off" on the education ladder. With PSLE, the students may go to the secondary school, the duration of which is four years. At the end of the secondary school, the students come to another "cut-off," officially termed as Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level Examination. For those students who aim at universities, they go on for a two-year pre-university courses; at the end of this period, again they sit in for Higher School Certificate (HSC), which enables them to go to the universities in Singapore or abroad in most of the Commonwealth States.

The so-called post-secondary education offers technical and industrial training; it takes in secondary students who finish their four-year study at the secondary school in either technical or commercial stream. (Secondary schools generally offer three programs: academic, technical, and commercial; all three programs

share the basic courses in the first two years, but offer different courses with emphasis on their own program in the later two years.)

The adult education provides opportunity for students who fail in PSLE and are 14 years old or older, to have a two-year vocational education and for those who are working but need certain commercial or technical courses.

At the higher education level, there are only two universities (University of Singapore and Nanyang University), a Teachers Training College, two technical colleges (Ngee Ann Technical College, and Singapore Polytechnic), and one institute (Singapore Technical Institute).*-1

Because of this quarternity principle in educational policy, curriculum and teaching became one of the most formidable tasks for educators to deal with in Singapore; problems such as unity to ensure standards and flexibility to adjust to each ethnic group are enormous and difficult to resolve. According to some Singapore educators,*-2 an Advisory Committee

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*-1 Except of the two universities (as mentioned previously), all the other institutions of higher education take secondary school graduates who have completed courses in technical stream.

*-2 Referred to the principals and teachers, whom the author spoke with when she visited schools in Singapore in Jan., 1974.

on Curriculum Development made up of teachers, principals, inspectors of school, and other specialists in education, was formed in 1969 to research, to recommend, and to supervise implementations on the matter of curriculum. At the present time, there are common syllabuses in the four official languages. Take primary and secondary schools as an example, the required subjects are as follows:[6]

The Primary School Curriculum

SUBJECTS	No. of hours spent per week*			
	Pri I & II	Pri III	Pri IV	Pri V & VI
First Language	6 7/12	6 1/4	5 7/12	5 2/3
National Language	—	1/2	7/12	7/12
Second Language	3 1/2	3 1/2	3 1/2	3 1/3
History	—	1 1/4	1 1/4	1 1/2
Geography	—	1 1/4	1 1/4	1 1/2
Science	1 1/2	1 1/2	2 1/2	2 1/3
Mathematics	3 1/2	3 1/2	3 1/2	4 1/2
Art, handwork and needlework	2	1 1/2	1 1/4	1 1/4
Music	1	1	1	7/12
Civics	1/2	1/2	7/12	2/3
Physical Education	1 1/2	1 1/2	1 1/2	1 1/4
Health Education	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/4
Assembly	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2
TOTAL:	20 5/6	22 11/12	22 1/12	24 1/3

* *Minor adjustments may be made by the schools*

The Common Secondary I and II Curriculum

Subjects	No. of hours per week*		
	Boys	Girls	
		Taking Technical subjects	Not taking Technical subjects
First Language and Literature	5	5	5
Second Language	3¾	3¾	3¾
National Language	1½	—	1½
Mathematics	3½	3½	3½
General Science	3¾	3¾	3¾
Physical Education	1¼	1¼	1¼
Civics	⅖	⅖	⅖
Assembly	⅖	⅖	⅖
History)) Geography)	2½	2½	2½
Home Economics	—	1¼	**3
Art and Crafts	1¼	1¼	1¼
Music/Singing	⅞	⅞	⅞
Technical Drawing	1¼	1¼	***(1¼)
Metalwork)) Woodwork)) Basic Electricity)	**3	**3	—
Total	28	28	28

* *Minor adjustments are made by schools where necessary.*

** *Normally outside school hours.*

*** *The principal has the discretion to allocate the time to history and geography or to any other subject other than general science and home economics.*

The Revised Secondary III and IV Curriculum--Technical Stream

Subjects	Periods* per week	Hours per week
A. Compulsory examination subjects 1. First Language 2. Second Language 3. Technical Drawing 4. Elementary Mathematics 5. Physics or Physical Science or Engineering Science	26	16½
B. Compulsory non-examination subjects 1. Civics/Current Affairs 2. Physical Education 3. Assembly Talks 4. Musical Appreciation/Singing	6 2) 2) 1) 1)	4½
C. Elective examination subjects 1. Additional Mathematics 2. Physical Science** 3. Engineering Science 4. Physics 5. Chemistry 6. Woodwork*** 7. Metalwork*** 8. Electricity and Electronics*** 9. Literature/History/Geography	9	6
TOTAL:	41	26

* *A period will last 35 or 40 minutes.*

** *C2 may not be taken with C4 or C5.*

*** *One only of C6, C7 and C8 must be taken.*

The Revised Secondary III and IV Curriculum--Non-Technical Stream

Subjects	Periods per week	Hours per week
A. Compulsory examination subjects	26	16½
1. First Language		
2. Second Language		
3. Literature or History or Geography		
4. A Science subject or Health Science or Home Economics		
5. Elementary Mathematics*		
B. Compulsory non-examination subjects	6	3½
1. Civics/Current Affairs	2)	
2. Physical Education	2)	
3. Assembly Talks	1)	
4. Musical Appreciation/Singing	1)	
C. Elective examination subjects**	9	6
1. Literature		
2. Geography		
3. History		
4. Bible Knowledge***		
5. Islamic Religious Knowledge		
6. Third Language		
7. Additional Mathematics		
8. General Science #		
9. Physical Science ##		
10. Physics		
11. Chemistry		
12. Biology		
13. Art and Crafts		
14. Music		
15. Needlework and Dressmaking		
16. Cookery		
17. General Housecraft		
18. Health Science		
19. Commercial Studies ###		
20. Commerce		
21. Principles of Accounts		
Total	41	26

* *Elementary mathematics is optional for students taking a total of 6 examination subjects.*

** *Special approval is required for 3 electives. Furthermore, not more than 2 science subjects (including A4) are to be taken.*

*** *C4 may not be taken with C5.*

#C8 may not be taken with C9.

##C9 may not be taken with C8 or C10 or C11.

###C19 may not be taken with C20.

In view of the prescribed courses shown on the tables above, a few emphases seem to be patent. First of all, it is the emphasis on language which is necessary for people to communicate with each other, and to ease conflict among them in such a multi-racial society like Singapore. In fact, the leader of Singapore, Lee Kuen-Yew himself is quite aware of this imperative skill for a successful political career, and has thus learned the languages of the major ethnic groups. The emphasis on language is generally carried out bilingually in most schools, and the students are introduced to two or three languages beginning at the primary level.

Secondly, the stress on technology is rather observable in many secondary schools. Often the visitors are first taken to the workshops in the school by its principal or director of the workshop to see the equipments and work of the students. Most secondary schools are equipped with wood and metal workshops, but the electrical workshop is often shared among schools in order to save the expensive installment cost, and to make the best use of the machine with less idling hours.

The schedule shows 4¼ hours of workshop and technical drawing out of 28 hours per week of total studies for the first two years for boys (technical or non-technical stream) and girls (only in technical stream). During these two years, the students

learn to use basic tools and designing, in wood work, metal work, and electrical work. For the next two years (the last two years of secondary school), if the boys choose to be in technical stream, and the girls who continue in technical stream, they will have more workshop in wood, metal, and electricity. Therefore, after four years of secondary education, the youngsters will be able to do basic wood, metal, and electrical work in the factory in case that they are unable to go on for higher education.

Thirdly, examinations at each level--Primary School Leaving Examination, Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level Examination, and Higher School Certificate, are seriously administered. "Pass or fail" is a matter of pride and future which the students, parents, and teachers are very much concerned with, because no one feels comfortable when one loses face.

Unually the numbers of "pass and fail" for certain examination in each school (generally disclosed publicly on the paper), is regarded as the indicator of its reputation. In addition, administering such examinations seems to have another mission, i.e., to ensure the standard of education, whether it works that way or not.

The government of the Republic of Singapore has indeed made great effort, through education, to build a cohesive multi-racial society, to train technical and industrial manpower to meet the needs of the rapid developing industry, and to inculcate in the young mind social consciousness and civic-mindedness for its national pride, which the government is eager to build up in hope of eliminating racial identity for a real "Singaporean."

Footnotes:

1 Angus Maude. South Asia. New York: Capricorn Books, 1967, p.136.

2 Claude A. Buss. Contemporary Southeast Asia. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970, p.41.

3 Ronald McKie. Singapore. Sydney, Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1972, p.5.

4 Ministry of Education. Education in Singapore. Singapore: Educational Publications Bureau, 1972, p.6.

5 Ibid., pp. 21-24.